Lake County History Updated 10.7.09

Lake County is the smallest of the 88 counties in Ohio and is bordered by Lake Erie, the 13th largest fresh water lake in the world with approximately 30 miles of shoreline in the County. It is located about thirty (30) miles northeast of the City of Cleveland. The County contains about 230 (ODNR) square miles of fertile lake plain and gently rolling upland plateau land and an estimated 234,030 people in 2008 (U.S. Census). Painesville is the County Seat and Mentor is its largest city with a population of over 50,000. The major transportation arteries in the County are the Interstate 90 and State Route 2 freeways, U. S. 20, State Routes 44, 84 and 283, the railroad lines and the Concord, Lost Nation and Cuyahoga airports. The Grand River and the Chagrin River dissect the County and provide the area with many economic and recreational activities in the area.

Lake Erie drew its name from the Erie Indians, former inhabitants of the north shore. The Iroquois Confederacy controlled the Lake County area since its 1655 conquest of the Erie Nation until they were defeated in 1897. The Erie Indians were the successors to the prehistoric Mound Builders. Early settlers immigrated from the New England area and by 1820, the settlers had a grist mill, saw mill, distillery, forge, blast furnace, tannery and shipyard as well as bridges, roads, and inns. The first permanent settlement occurred in 1799 in the Mentor area of The Western Reserve. Dock, road and railroad construction attracted Irish, Finn, Manx, Slovak and Hungarian workers, early contributors to Lake County's diverse ethnic heritage. By the mid-19th century, markets had been established for the exportation of potash, peppermint oil, lumber, furniture, wagons, iron products, and cheese produced by a booming dairy industry.

Lake County was formed on March 6, 1840 with state approval of a split between the northern and southern townships of old Geauga County.   The County has a rich history of having actively participating in the Underground Railroad to help the transportation of slaves to freedom and safety in the Canadian borders.

The plentiful Lake Erie water source supplies public, domestic and industrial uses. The first nursery stock was produced between 1845 and 1850 and has since become a major enterprise producing one third of the stock in Ohio.   Currently, leading industrial products are medical products, metal products, musical and scientific instruments, chemicals, and plastics. Shipping and boating activities are found at the mouth of the Grand River in Grand River Village and Fairport Harbor Village.

The County now boasts of its tourism and recreation amenities. The Lake Metroparks and other recreation opportunities offer nature preserves, bird watching, hiking or walking paths, bikeways, picnic

areas and special outdoor events.   Lake Erie and river shorelines offer swimming, canoeing, fishing, bird watching, and other water-related opportunities that draw many visitors to Lake County.   The Holden Arboretum, Mentor Marsh Nature Preserve, Lake Farm Parks, Mentor Headlands Park with its large sandy beach, Fairport Harbor light house, and many others provide educational and recreational facilities. Residents and visitors also enjoy the many golf courses available throughout the County. The Lake County Historical Society provides tours of the old Lake County Home, historical homes including two Frank Lloyd Wright homes, gardens and the Underground Railroad routes. There are two national historic landmarks in the County; Lawnfield, President Garfield's Victorian house and museum in Mentor and the Kirtland Temple of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints in Kirtland.

Educational and cultural activities have grown in the Lake County area through the Lake Erie College, Lakeland Community College, Willoughby School of Fine Arts and the Rabbit Run Theatre programs with public art shows, plays, dances, bands, and orchestra programs. The Rabbit Run Theater is the only rustic barn summer theater left in the area.

Lake County has a diverse population and economy, with a variety of historic, recreational and cultural opportunities that provide a high quality of life for its residents and communities. Today, we have 23 communities: 5 townships, 9 cities, 9 villages.